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U.S. POLICY AND THE POLITICS OF OTHERS

Working Notes on Vietnam No. 3


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When a patient enters a hospital with a swollen knee, the X ray technician takes pictures of both his knees. The aim is to permit the examining doctor to make a comparison between the "sick" knee and the normal one. Only by comparing to a normal knee can he realize how bad is the "sick" one.

US officials and press-reporters visit South Vietnam when that country is critically sick. They do know that there is a sickness, but simply by not knowing how it actually was before the sickness, they fail to realize the gravity of the sickness, to make a difference between a pathologic symptom and normal character.

Thus, many American observers sincerely believe that, for instance, corruption is the normal way of life of the Vietnamese people, or a Vietnamese cares only about his own family, never has any sense of nationalism and patriotism. And when asked about the behaviour of the Vietcong, the same American replies that patriotism and nationalism displayed by the VC are "abnormalities", something "outside the tradition-valley" of the Vietnamese.

It should be also noted that the reading of books on Vietnam by French authors greatly contributes to such mistaken views.

Because of the same thought-process, US officials believed that Ky and Khanh were quite acceptable (by Vietnamese) as they look much better than others around them.

No one cares about comparing the Saigon "knee" with the Hanoi "knee" so as to realize how serious sick the Saigon "knee" is.



PREFACE

In a recent memo which was the basis for a seminar on the subject of "U.S. National Interests", Arthur Smithies gave second place in a list of interests "on which there seems to be something approaching a national consensus" to: "Ideological and political interests." The U.S. has an interest in the existence of liberal-democratic ideologies and regimes in as much of the world as possible... We believe, I think rightly, that the survival of our own system depends importantly on the extent to which compatible systems prevail through the world."

At the seminar, I challenged the notion that the "we" here included many of the high-level U.S. officials responsible for national security, unless the word "compatible" were broad enough to include many regimes in less-developed-countries that were -- whatever their merits in terms of administrative competence, friendliness to the U.S., or opposition to communism -- far more authoritarian and non-representational than "liberal-democratic," both in their origins and style of governing. I will elaborate my direct comments on this point elsewhere, but meanwhile, for those whose interests were aroused by Smithies' seminar, I offer here some rather condensed notes written some time ago that bear upon one part of this issue.

This paper begins by calling, implicitly, for greater understanding in the U.S. Government of the impact of our policies and interventions abroad upon the domestic politics of other nations, and of the relevance of the domestic politics of those nations to those aspects of their governmental performance on which U.S. interests depend. "Politics" in these two contexts is not, of course, synonymous with "democratic" politics. Political (distinguished here from administrative, economic, or military) aims, functions, institutions and processes are to be found and usefully studied from this point of view in every sort of regime, and it is not only their "democratic" forms that are relevant to the questions posed at the beginning of the paper.

However, these notes do proceed to focus almost entirely upon certain positive, functional aspects of democratic processes, just because



I think that these aspects are typically neglected by high level U.S. decision-makers. This assertion may seem paradoxical; several participants at the seminar appeared to think it so. I take it that they held the common view (which seems to me a misleading stereotype) that most such U.S. policy-makers are conscious only of the benefits, not of the costs, risks, or drawbacks of political procedures like our own in foreign environments, to such a degree that they miss no opportunity in operational decision-making to encourage or even enforce Western-style political institutions upon underdeveloped countries where they are inappropriate.

I happen to think this picture is sharply misleading, for most such policy-makers, in most situations. I know that one rarely, if ever, sees in cables to or from our embassies the sort of considerations addressed in these notes, when the subject matter would make them appropriate, though one often does find competing considerations. And I have a very strong feeling, based on many conversations with colleagues who were employees of State, Defense, Aid and CIA, that such considerations were no more evident to them (obvious as they may be to some readers) than they were to me at the time. (A number of Vietnamese, on the other hand, along with a very few Americans, contributed greatly to my own learning process. For a relatively recent influence, see my D-19127 and several others I will be putting out shortly on the views of Vu Van Thai and Hoang Van Chi: D-19128, D-19134, D-19135 and D-19136.

Perhaps I am wrong. It may be that I was the only one around in the period, say, 1964 to 1966, who did not fully understand the bearing of these sorts of considerations upon questions the U.S. was facing of what people and proposals to back in Vietnam, or who failed to weigh them adequately in calculations. But I don't think so.

*I don't think that, in principle, Western style political institutions can be inappropriate to any LDC. What make them look inappropriate is the way they are implemented by despotic rulers in these countries - They have 1001 tricks to distort democratic processes.*



## U.S. POLICY AND THE POLITICS OF OTHERS

Much of our policy-making and intelligence forecasting in international affairs suffers, I believe, from blindness to the role of domestic politics of other nations in their foreign affairs -- its impact on their initiatives, their inertias, their responses -- and to the impact of our own policies and other events upon their politics. If this is so, one reason, I suspect, is that we are in no state to apply a "mirror image" projection based on our own understanding of the relation of politics to policy in our own country, the United States. For we scarcely have such an understanding. Some Americans (many acting politicians, some journalists, a very few others, including some academics) "feel" U.S. politics: they have a set of relevant intuitions, borne of sensitivity and experience. But almost no one in America seems to "understand" politics, as it is actually played, in an articulated, explicit, analytical/conceptual fashion susceptible to communication, generalization, and extrapolation. And this holds even more for the relation of politics to bureaucratic decision-making. Few Americans have a "feel" for the domestic politics of a foreign nation, and again, almost none "know" it. And even a good "feel" for U.S. politics doesn't allow explicit extrapolation to a foreign context, as basis for a mirror image analogy, quite apart from the question of the validity of such a projection. A similar situation obtains with respect to the influence of bureaucratic organization and factors upon policy, including Cabinet politics and "Presidential politics" (though Neustadt's work here goes beyond a beginning.) In Vietnam we have never predicted well the performance of our own machinery: a fatal limitation, as of spring 1965, with respect to the political and bureaucratic processes being set in motion and the performance to be expected from our bombing of North Vietnam and from our troop buildup in the South.

What is the influence of the political organizations, the origins of government, the sources of government power and the nature of opposition, freedom of political expression and association, and the



nature of succession in office, upon national executive decision-making in a given country? These questions are rarely asked, and would be hard for us to answer, about a foreign country: partly, as I have suggested above, because we have scarcely sought or found answers to them for our own country. What is the character of national leadership? If there are "politicians," what breed? What do they think they are up to, and what is their actual effect? What is the influence of the legislature, if any, and parties, upon policy? What is the impact of having a bureaucracy run at the top by politicians, as in the United States, or by military officers, as in much of the less-developed world (now including Greece)? A specific problem or unknown is: What is the function and importance of national leadership? What does "leadership" in politics consist of in the given country: why, in what way, to what extent is it needed? What qualities underly "leadership"? What is the relevance, to the ongoing exercise of leadership, of those criteria by which leaders are chosen? On the last point: One thing we know about politics in the United States is that candidates are chosen largely on grounds of voter "acceptability" (either to the mass, or to special groups) that give great weight to: regional origin, race, appearance, accent, social origin, religion, as well as to background factors like military service, past employment, family life, "character," manner, and past actions and statements.

These criteria are often thought of as appealing to the "irrational," frivolous, parochial (in a pejorative sense), emotionally biased aspect of voter behavior: in distinction from considerations like intelligence, experience, competence, program, and associations, that appear more relevant to reasonable expectations of performance. If a voting process like this produces competent governors, it is thought to do so in spite of this character. And since such "political" criteria are commonly regarded as really irrelevant to the functional demands of running the government -- as opposed to getting elected -- there is a tendency among U.S. officials, with wide public agreement, to see the overthrow, or avoidance, or postponement,



of an electoral process elsewhere among allies or client states as small loss or even a probable gain in terms of filling high offices with "competent administrators" and "strong leaders." In other words, this change will often privately be seen by U.S. officials as a definite improvement in terms of U.S. interests -- e.g., in opposing Communism, or in political stability, or economic development toward self-reliance -- and even in terms of the deeper, longer-run interests of the country itself. And it may be that a good case can be made for this, in particular circumstances. But what requires attention is the frequent inability of these officials to imagine any counter-arguments, any drawbacks or competing considerations along the same lines.

This attitude typically overlooks, among other things, even the possibility (actually, I would say, the strong probability) that the sort of criteria that constitute, in a democracy, "voter appeal" are relevant under any sort of government to the ability of a national executive to exercise leadership: to motivate and inspire both his instruments, and the public; to induce popular acceptance of policies and cooperation; to be "credible," to influence opinion and attitude; to maintain and control a political party, a cadre; to inspire trust, a willingness to suspend or dampen doubts and criticism; to contain unrest, opposition, criticism, apathy; in short, to produce a climate in which a government can function and implement new policies. The alternatives to leadership that has these attributes of "acceptability" may be:

(a) lack of leadership, or ineffective leadership, inertia, failure or inability to implement policies or make them effective (SVN: 1963-1967);

(b) heavy reliance on coercion, always necessary to some degree, but higher in cost and lower in effectiveness, perhaps ever-increasingly so, under these conditions: using up government resources and attention, working inefficiently, at the cost of other problems (SVN: 1958-63);

(c) the "avoidable" buildup of an organized opposition, or numerous oppositions, alongside and feeding on mass apathy or hostility: threatening chaos or revolution (SVN: 1963, 1964, 1966).



\*

The Vietnamese believe that good-will is more essential than competence, ability or skill and communist experience proves that ~~xxxx~~ such a belief is perfectly correct (look at the military ability developed by Giap who never had any military education, at Xuan Thuy, Nguyen Thi Binh, in diplomacy and international politics, etc...)

Good-will in Vietnam (i.e. good-will in doing something for the country) is tested by patriotic deeds, and for each successive generation, there was at least one occasion for such a test: The revolutionary movement in the early 30's, the War for independence (1946-54), the anti-Diem movement ... Anyone who failed in these tests cannot be branded as a genuine patriot and therefore cannot secure popular support.

At present, the situation is as follows : the communists were applying the following criteria for recruitment and promotion of cadres :  
1) what is your social background ? Good if you are poor peasant or worker. Acceptable if you are middle-class. Very favorable if you are from a revolutionary family. 2) Did you ever join any revolutionary movement ? How many years have you been in jail?  
3) How much can you bear hardship ? 4) Whether or not you can neglect the interest of your family ? Etc ...

While the criteria for recruitment (not including corruption and nepotism) are : 1) What diploma do you have ? How many years in college ? in the administration (including French or Bao Dai administration ? ... Under Diem other criteria were added : Are you Catholic ? Are you from Central Vietnam ? Member of the Can-lao

TSVP →



This is to say that even without corruption, nepotism and favoritism, South Vietnam can never produce an administrative machinery as dedicated as North Vietnam and in the case of Vietnam there is no efficiency without dedication. Compare a Jacques Owen (Nguyen Xuan Oanh) with any Communist leader, preferably the less educated and you find the difference.



Of course, an electoral process by no means guarantees the selection of leaders with broad "voter appeal": neither in less-developed countries nor in our own. Nor is there any inherent reason why leaders otherwise chosen -- in a coup, or by inheritance, or by us -- cannot have these qualities, even to a high degree (look at Ho, or Castro). But one can say the odds are higher with one process than with the others. Yet we give little attention or weight to this possible advantage of an electoral process because, more fundamentally, we are little attuned to the practical significance, in "hardheaded" terms, of these attributes of national leadership.

Ignoring these consequences, we "choose," or accept and support leaders like Khanh or Ky -- who violate almost every known canon of political acceptability in South Viet Nam -- simply because their policy instincts are acceptable to us, or we think we can influence their policies; and because we think them "energetic," or relatively capable administrators. Then we wonder why policies simply don't get executed, fail to have any effect, or are torn apart by unrest.

Similar issues arise in the politics of an alliance, or of the "Free World." Walter Lippman asserts (plausibly): (Bangkok World, 11 April 1967, underlining added)

The Europeans do not doubt or underestimate the power of the U.S. in military affairs and economic affairs.... But the political and moral influence of the U.S., the willingness of Europeans to follow the leadership of Washington, has decreased drastically in the past several years.

The point is that even recognized strength -- even along with forcefulness, willingness to use it -- doesn't always confer effective leadership, where consent, willing cooperation, is needed: either in a government, a team, an alliance, or a loose association. These ask, as well, of a proposed leader: "Where will he lead us? Is he astute enough to get where we want to go? What values influence his choice of means? Can he attract and hold the necessary support? Does he have 'moral' qualities (fatherly, big brotherly; political ideals) that will induce in enough supporters a willingness to follow,



to serve, to accept 'legitimate' subordination, without sacrificing one's own dignity, self-respect, or one's support from others? Is it easy to explain to oneself and to those who respect and rely on us why we are 'accepting' this leadership?"

Aside from the role of the qualities of the leadership, we are likewise blind, with respect to other countries, to the potential impact on government performance of the process of election (parties, vote-getting, platform, contact with voters, voter involvement), and the anticipation of later elections: impact on a sense among those elected of responsibility to the people, self-confidence, a feeling of authority and legitimacy, of independence of other institutions and of foreign power, and a knowledge of voters and their concerns. Anticipation of future elections can lead to recognition of the importance of presentation and explanation of policies, timing, meeting deadlines, presenting balanced programs, maintaining continuous contact with voters and blocs, forming alliances, and avoiding open corruption. Likewise, the role of a legislature freely elected and representative (satisfying, in particular, criteria of regional/religious acceptability) is little regarded: in filling these functions, in building a climate in which leadership is possible, reducing the felt need for open revolts or passive resistance; giving a feeling of participation/voice/influence to groups and regions, a base for acceptance and cooperation with a national leader who does not, in himself, satisfy particularist criteria.

Major General E. G. Lansdale (who is a striking exception to the generalizations above on U.S. officials) has persistently raised the question in official circles of the peculiar political requirements/functions to be met in a country confronted with a Chinese-Communist-style insurgency (with cadre, ideology, guerrillas, a mass base, as in the Philippines, Malaya, Vietnam): as distinct from political needs or acceptable forms (which may still be similar) in Asian, or under-developed, or newly-independent countries not so immediately threatened (like Korea, Pakistan, India, or most African nations). This problem is, moreover, distinct from the simultaneous

*It seems that you somewhat overestimate the capability of religious figures in the fight against Communism. Religion on any scale tends to be passive to Communist but not an absolute one. The Communists can always drive a wedge between the clergy and their followers by denouncing them as plotters.*



problems of containing infiltration/support, and using military/police tactics, building administrative structures; or the needs for competence and resources: in countries threatened by insurgencies. These threatened countries have peculiar needs -- not unique, but unusually urgent -- for drawing popular support, for showing leadership and dedication, inspiring sacrifice and risk, for attracting support away from Communists.

As Lansdale has pointed out (often at great cost to his credibility within the bureaucracy), elections and representative forms are, in fact, specifically relevant to the following political functions, which, in the absence of such "democratic" forms, call for alternative processes:

1. How to find people of demonstrated leadership capability and political skills? People capable of mobilizing popular support, inspiring bureaucracy, and recruiting dedicated, able leaders: all essential in avoiding or countering (or leading) insurgency?
2. How to motivate leaders to earn popular support? Or, to adopt policies reflecting both national and parochial interests?
3. How to give factions a sense of participation, voice, influence, in normal process of government -- without the necessity of demonstrations, conspiracy, revolt?
4. How to give a sense of legitimacy, mandate, to the Government?
5. How to face a Communist political threat, reflecting in part the lack of support for the government, the politicization of peasant elite and the need for Governmental repressive measures.

How, in short, if democratic processes are not to be in the picture, are these functions or needs to be met without such "Western" procedures and institutions as elections, parties, a free press, a representative legislature? The point is not that such devices are always appropriate, or even feasible, in all contexts; or that they are ever sufficient, for these functions to be filled effectively; or that they are necessary; or that they are without evident and often serious risks, costs, limitations, inefficiencies. But what seems a serious lack in our high-level foreign-policy deliberations within



*Stability should be understood as a continuity of non-Communist government, sympathetic (or at least not opposed) to the general interest of the U.S. -- not as a leader or an administration which remains unchanged when the situation is changing (or deteriorating) so fast --*

the Government is that the importance of the functions described above -- which might, along with others, almost be defined as "those political functions to which elections, protection of minority rights, and other 'democratic' institutions are relevant" -- in a state in whose stability and performance we have a strong interest and perhaps involvement is so often underemphasized or unrecognized. And a secondary but still significant problem is that this very relevance of democratic institutions to such needs -- with little promise, indeed, in many cases, except (to paraphrase Churchill) in comparison to real alternatives -- is little-likely to be recognized by a high U.S. official in the context of a less-developed or non-Western society. (Again, I am speaking of perceived relevance to "practical" short-run imperatives, not of the aura surrounding such notions as "ideals" in the very-long-run, and for everywhere in the world, at that. U.S. officials defer to these "values," some more reverently than others, just like most other Americans: especially in their public rhetoric. But not, for very many, in their responsible, operational actions.) If I have said nothing specific here about the real problems, obstacles and drawbacks to such "solutions," it is only because these shortcomings crowd quickly to mind in the officials I have encountered. It is the conceivable advantages to national interests, theirs and ours (other than to "image" in the West), that don't occur to them.

Thus, even when democratic forms are suggested, or demanded, as solutions to urgent political needs by significant elements within the non-Western society itself (e.g., the Buddhist hierarchy, repeatedly, in Vietnam), it is hard for these officials to take such proposals seriously, on their face, as having an instrumental relevance to deeply-felt wants or useful consequences. "What is it these fellows really want?" is the question with which they meet such proposals. ("Isn't it just to bring the government down, and get in there themselves, and then clamp down on everyone?") This cynicism may well be in order, but not to the point of excluding -- as it usually does -- any consideration whatever of the question: "Might there be something



in what they say, that these processes might do some good -- not just for these proponents, or for the hearts and minds of American newspaper-readers -- good for both our countries, in terms of the very interests we share?" Or even: "Might they know what's good for their country?"

That last thought meets much less resistance when an energetic, militarily competent, U.S.-trained, idealistic officer is proposing to overthrow the Constitution, end corruption and bickering, and crack down on Communists. But when a civilian less favorably known to us (or not known at all) calls on us or his leaders to support or institute or carry out or reform a Constitution, no matter with what appearance of conviction or references to popular feeling, the same U.S. official is likely to think, rather: "What an obvious attempt to curry favor with an American listener."

And in many cases, of course, he may be right: ironically.

The difference seems to be as follows: When a U.S. trained officer is proposing something, as he talks in more or less correct English, he gives the impression that he well understands Western culture and Western policies & institutions. Then the U.S. official is inclined to listen to him, considering him as "Someone who knows what I know, and knows something I don't know. There for he may be right in his opinion." But when Tri-Quang asked for Election and a Constitution the first reaction of an U.S. official is: "He must have some other motive since he is asking for something he is certainly does not understand!"

In short the mistake is this: U.S. officials fail to know that non-Western trained Vietnamese (look at Hanoi leaders) know more about Western politics, (including U.S. politics (look at Xuan Thuy) than most Western-trained Saigon elite. Why? Because the former take pains to study, to observe, to think, while the latter do not.



### DILEMMAS OF POLITICAL INTERVENTION

Suppose that the considerations in the preceding notes came to be fully appreciated by the relevant, high-level U.S. policy-makers: what then? Few difficult problems of practical policy would suddenly appear simple. Very many other sorts of considerations, some of them directly conflicting with those above, must come to bear on any hard problems of choosing a U.S. course of action that may influence the course of politics and political change in a given country at a particular time. These complexities have a way of presenting themselves in the shape of dilemmas to choosers of policy -- several familiar forms of which are described below -- and that would still be true even after those officials had absorbed the "civics lesson" expounded above.

Nevertheless, I think there might be two useful effects of such new appreciation of the functional relevance of certain quasi-democratic processes in less-developed societies.

In particular cases, some of the conflicts of aims, and policy dilemmas, presented below might then seem less sharply in conflict, more reconcilable. Thus, certain policies leading to more democratic societies in the long run might appear to have greater advantages and smaller risks even in the short-run, or in terms of other goals (such as administrative competence, lowered costs and reduced U.S. involvement), than are now commonly perceived by policy-makers. On the other hand, where now the balance of considerations in the minds of typical officials normally, I would maintain, favors rather heavily the first of each of the pairs of complex aims listed below, more weight given to the arguments in the preceding discussion might shift some attention to the second class of objectives in each pair.

With these conjectures in mind (but without carrying through the analysis) let us consider how competing ends often present themselves to U.S. Government desk officers, their bosses, and field representatives.



The following pairs of aims are often seen by the United States Government to be in conflict, with respect to available alternative courses of action. This perceived conflict is often exaggerated, but usually has a real basis.

1. (a) Short-run aims: maintain or achieve stability; *(see my note of page 7)*  
 avoid chaos; keep some effort running (or keep "momentum");  
 avoid immediate communist exploitation of unrest; avoid  
 military disaster or defeat; avoid coming to power or in-  
 fluence of individuals inclined to favor or permit com-  
 munist advances.

vs. (b) Long-run aims: achieve political viability of the  
 allied Government even against a communist challenge,  
 without continued U.S. support; hold down costs of U.S.  
 support; reduce future non-communist threats and pressures  
 against regime; increase U.S. leverage or influence over  
 the regime (a mid-term goal); *If S.VN has a patriotic leader, no  
 leverage or pressure is necessary -*

2. (a) "Strong" government: capable administration, coherent  
 base, disciplined, tough, anti-communist (preferably pro-  
 American), "realistic," adequately oriented to military  
 needs and internal security.

vs. (b) Government with popular support, representative,  
 allowing increasing freedoms, oriented to political and  
 social modernizing and development as well as economic  
 and military; nationalistic (as bulwark against communism).

[We tend particularly to exaggerate the conflict here:  
 we typically fail to see any ways in which attributes  
 under (b) can be valuable, even essential, to long-run  
 aims of genuinely "strong," stable and able government;  
 at the same time we are often blind to the limitations  
 in these same respects of unpopular, anti-communist,  
 military regimes. ]



3. (a) Government leaders friendly to U.S., trained (if military) in U.S. and known to U.S. (military) leaders, with "Western" style minds, dependent on U.S. financial and military aid, without other sources of advice, influence or support.

vs. (b) Leaders who are charismatic or "traditional"/respectable/representative, nationalistic and who are popularly supported.

4. (a) Support of current government, with all its weaknesses.

vs. (b) Support of long-run aims, or encouragement of a government with more desirable characteristics.

5. (a) Safeguarding/achieving major U.S. interests in the area, by actively encouraging certain kinds of political development.

vs. (b) Not interfering in internal affairs of another nation (especially, to disrupt a status quo: thus incurring a stronger and more risky responsibility).

Thus, for example, a recurrent situation embodying these conflicts is this one:

- (a) We want a "stronger" government, in country X, and also a more "accepted" government.
- (b) The current government is terrible in various ways, and unpopular; moreover, it is not strong or effective enough;
- (c) but visible alternative leaderships, which might be more acceptable to their public, more respected, more concerned for popular wishes and welfare, also look less "strong": less coherent, administratively capable, inclined to enforce discipline on government apparatus; more lenient toward (and vulnerable to) communists; and perhaps also, less open to U.S. influence, less known to U.S. leaders.



- (d) Moreover, any attempt to encourage or switch our support to the best of these alternative leaderships might lead to disastrous countermeasures by present regime, or to a chaotic struggle for power, and/or eventual domination by the worst leaderships or communists.

Dilemma: Do we: (1) overthrow the current government (which may mean simply, stop supporting it); or do we (2) build it up; support it and hope to improve it? We tried both, at different times, in Vietnam: providing classic illustrations -- perhaps because of bad timing -- of the risks and disadvantages of each. (Meanwhile, the situation might well be, but rarely is, seen as a trilemma, with the third alternative being to reduce our commitment to the country and our involvement in its problems.)

Thus, the arguments in 1966-67 for working with, supporting, and not pressing Ky, were the same as those for doing the same with the French in 1950-54, and with Diem in 1958-63. (It is interesting to contrast Lodge's arguments for supporting Ky, in 1967, with his arguments against continuing with Diem in 1963.) Or for doing the same with Batista. Or Chiang. To cite any of these is not to say that an earlier switch to alternative leaderships would surely have worked better; indeed, it may be to suggest that the third option -- reduced involvement -- deserved much more attention than it ever got, despite its own risks.

*The switch to an alternative leadership did not work well because many other things (general policy, attitude, approach etc.) which should be changed remained in fact unchanged -*